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Jan 25th, 10:50 AM - 11:05 AM

# Using Primary Resources for Your Research

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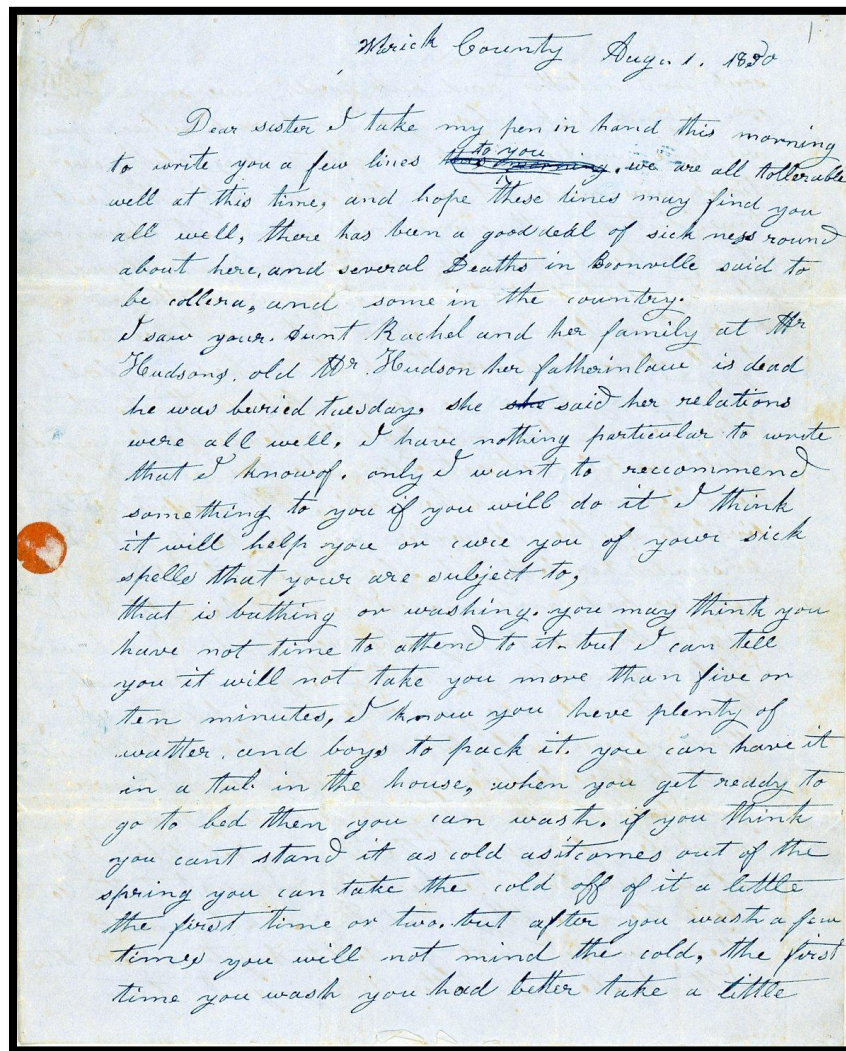
Jeffrey, Jonathan, "Using Primary Resources for Your Research" (2017). *Moving along the Track to Promotion & Tenure*. 2.  
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## Using Primary Sources in Research

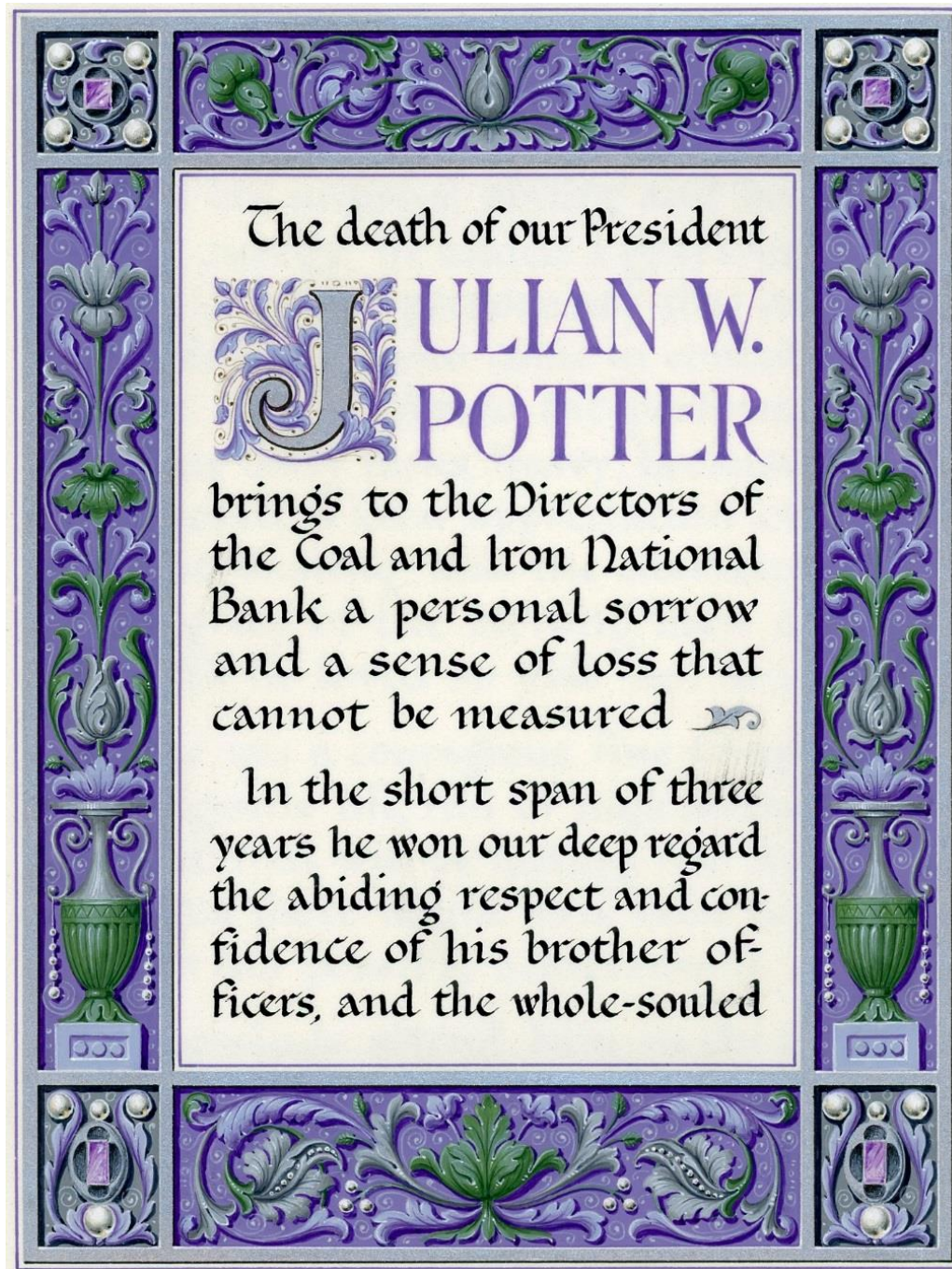
Use of primary sources (first hand accounts, letters, diaries, journals, newspapers, government documents, etc.) are often and should be used when taking a historical approach to any topic. These items can be found in collections or as single items. Primary sources help prove or legitimize your conclusions.

Or, they can provide color for the bland black and white print of which most scholarship consists. That can take the form of real live examples – 19<sup>th</sup> century cures and remedies. In this letter Rebecca Condict of Warrick County, Indiana, writes to her sister Mary in Ohio County, Kentucky, in 1830 advising frequent bathing as a cure for sickness:





Or through illustrations: If writing about memorialization (which will take place quite a bit as we approach the centennial of U.S. involvement in WWI), you might use the Julian Whit Potter memorial, which the Chemical and Coal Bank commissioned from Tiffany & Co.





Or the piece itself may be illustrative. Let's say you were writing something about romantic love in the mid-nineteenth century, you might want to include this 19<sup>th</sup> century Valentine.



## **Caveats When Using Primary Sources**

**Access** – Another location to have to go to and limited hours, however more and more is available online, but you should never assume that everything is online. Sometimes repositories don't have copyright or they have a backlog. Access to our collections: finding aids on TopSCHOLAR, KenCat records, One Search. Keep in mind that your archivist is your best friend. We do as much online reference as we do in person. You may have to use surrogate copies. Inquire about special situations – Laura Clay papers. When visiting repositories that hold primary sources, don't be surprised if you have to use only pencil, lock up your belongings, use only their paper.

**Use** – You should discuss usage with the archivist. Sometimes they require permission (proprietary – private institutions have more stringent requirements) and particularly with illustrations. Not full access, some material may be restricted at the request of the donor.

**Citations** – institution may require special notes in citations and credits. Certainly all photos and illustrations should be properly credited.

**Objectivity** – Biggest issue in using primary sources is the examining them for objectivity. Just because someone wrote something in a diary doesn't mean it's true, but it does give evidence about how a particular person with their socio/economic filters felt about an issue. Every day we see this skewed objectivity measurement taking place on social media and the media in general. Just ask someone who they think the news objectively, CNN or Fox News, and you will get an earful. Using primary sources requires that you look at the filters of the creators. We must use discerning eyes when using these sources, but they are worth spending the time with. I think you will find them fascinating. They are great material to use in teaching critical thinking.